The American People

August 1, 1998 By Larry Kramer

Two excerpts from his upcoming novel

They talk about poisons. Dr. Sister Grace Hooker calls Isidore Schmuck Medical Center and arranges to meet Dr. Israel Jerusalem. These two peculiar people meet each other in the small park across from the White House. Each had demurred re: Approaching closer to the other's turf. Israel distrusts all things Catholic: Anything that had as its symbol a man nailed to a cross said it all. Grace, not all that keen on Jews herself, put her foot down on Schmuck, which she couldn't even bring herself to say. She traced her distrust of the Hebraic to being brought up a Hooker. Early Americans didn't like Jews any more than later ones.

Israel knew of Grace. He'd read her many articles in the many journals. She is some hard worker. She puts him to shame. Yes, he feels guilty in her presence. He knows he's stuck, somewhere, somehow. He is not acclimatizing. That is what Shmuel said. He is having trouble in the New World.

At home (he lives in something called the Waldbaum Towers), he, night after night and on weekends, stares into space. He isn't clinically depressed. He is just depressed. Unacclimatized.

What is my life in aid of? Why am I doing what I am doing? What am I doing? Why am I not doing what I should be doing?

Oh, it is a curse to be so steeped in Dr. Freud. Israel has read everything. A little knowledge is messy. Israel is a mess.

I now see how painful civilization must be for anyone who thinks. I am very angry with you, Sigmund, for teaching me this. Before you, I could function.

Waldbaum Towers is filled with Jewish families with growing bank accounts. The Depression was gestern. Heute bist fabulous. War shmore. War is good for business.

When it's over...? When it's over, it will get even better.

Israel cannot believe no one counts the bodies. Ten minutes after armistice everyone's forgetting. Hitler? Who was he? He's dead!

The Depression is not over. The depression is just beginning!

“So wast wantchen du?”

Why am I talking like this to her? I make myself incomprehensible.

Why is he talking this way to me? He is incomprehensible.

She forges ahead anyway. “I have studied the fluid you took from over the eye of Evvilleena Stadtdotter.”

“That is many years ago.” He remembers.

“It is poison.”

“I know it is poison. That is why you called me here across from the White House?”

They both look across the street. Somewhere inside that house, Mr. Truman is taking care of America. With his fine wife and daughter who sings. I hope Harry knows what he’s doing, each of them thinks. Grace even crosses herself out of habit.

“With what did you busy yourself during the war?”

“I studied a sample of blood from a nun, Sister Fidelma Mae Chinchillie. It was sent to me by Dr. Florence Nu.”

“These are unusual names.”

Grace nods. They both smile.

She plunges in. “I have done further tests. Both samples had 912 bela. And both can be measured on the glyphic scale as nine under. I think the fedema liquid is a false trail and not worth pursuing.”

“Then why are we here?” he asked. He is surprised at how much her finding stings him. Who is this woman calling false?

“Why are you frowning?” she confronts him. “You really did not complete your work. You found something interesting and you abandoned it, and if Dr. Nu had not come upon your slide accidentally, I should not be here. The work I did was work you should have done. I am tired of cleaning up men’s slops.”

He stares at her. When confronted, he becomes tongue-tied. When confronted, he walks away. He

stands up and starts to go off.

“Where are you going? You uncovered something of historical significance, and I am trying to discuss it with you, and you walk away! Is this how men become famous? By walking away? Come back immediately!” She heaves her bulk up and, in her waddling fashion, runs after him. With her good left arm, she restrains him.

“What is of historical significance if you are calling it false and I an idler?”

She smiles kindly. And shakes her head a tiny bit in disbelief. Men have to be nuzzled and cuddled all along the way. “But, surely, you must know that in research the mistakes, the false starts, are as important as the successes, and that…You fool!” She is suddenly angry that he’s so naive. She then notices his eyes are kind, and with tears. He is still a child, and her voice softens. “You must be brilliant to have done what you did. It shows great instinct to take the sample in the first place. Great discoveries come from great hunches. How did you know to do that?”

Words still will not come to Israel. Inside him, there are many things he wants to express. He is so thirsty and yet he cannot drink. Here is a fellow scientist who would understand. He has never had anyone to talk to before. She takes him seriously. At Isidore Schmuck, there are only, well, schmucks.

“Talk to me!” She commands him. She stands there in Lafayette Square, a huge rock in a black frock, shouting her order.

The tears overflow from his eyes. This is unnecessary, they both say inside themselves. Tears are unnecessary. But there is no doubt they are both touched. Tears touch you.

Then he starts to talk to her. He takes her hands, which she is holding out toward him, and they sit down on another bench, this time with their backs to Mr. Truman and his fine wife and daughter who sings.

“Glause,” he says.

“What is glause?”

“I do not know. I cannot get this word from my head. I have seen it before, the poison. And it was called “glause.” And I have what Freud would call repression.” He takes his palms and presses them fervently against his forehead, as if he could squeeze pus from this recalcitrant pimple. “Explain, please, my failure, as you called it.”

“The pale belly-button is problematic.” He nods. “You could make a case for something defouled.” He nods again. She then goes over, in great detail, the existence of Dr. Flo’s sac of poisoned blood. Blood, not fluid, has surrounded the fedema. “This could make a case for something defouled in

the navel, that the other protertia had entered. And rearranged the providia."

Then she stops and suddenly asks him, "Do you remember mismytosis?"

His brow wrinkles. The word is not unfamiliar. Again and suddenly, his eyes gleam with a few tears. He is realizing that mismytosis is somewhere deep inside him with glause. (He should not have been so hard on himself. He was in Palestine. Mismytosis there, before the era of international medical journals, was called "aliyahhah.")

She thrusts her right shoulder forward, for emphasis, at dramatic moments, as she goes on. "I sense, in the navel, in this sac, a hint of mismytosis. I obtained your prehectral slides. And those from Nostra Mater. I studied them in many ways. Then I put them through my own vinge. You could make a case for defouled mismytosis. Of course you could also make a case that all blood discolorations are minus vel and plus ly. There is some sort of whole new avenue opening up here. Do you understand?"

They sit silently, looking into space. Israel finds himself saying, "There were swollen testicles." Were they actually swollen? He could not remember. They were certainly diseased.

"Evvilleena is not a woman?"

He tells her the story of Evvilleena Stadtdotter. Then he asks her, "Are you family to Mercy Hooker?"

She stares at him. "You were the doctor!" She remembers the publicity. "I must know! What happened?"

He tells her about the spiked penises. Ten, 15 years after the event, he tells her of what he remembers as if it was yesterday. Grace's mouth falls open. Israel nods in agreement.

What is in all this? So much long-ago tawdriness mixed with so much poison. So much that belongs in the tabloids and so little that stands up in the laboratory.

"They are preparing new laws."

"They are always passing laws. What kind of laws? What are you talking about?"

"Senator—. One of my patients. He tells me. There is to be a new division with much power and authority to regulate what treatments we may prescribe and what the manufacturers of pharmaceuticals can sell and, most important, our very basic scientific research itself. The Department of Food and Drug Supervision. FADS."

"FADS?"

“We shall be forbidden much that we are now permitted.”

“Don’t be such a defeated person! Before the doors have even opened and faceless bureaucrats are even chosen. What do you care anyway? Of laws and rules. The great ones always break the rules!” She finds herself disgusted with him again and now it is her turn to start to leave without so much as a goodbye.

“When can I see you again?”

She turns and addresses her manifesto more to the park and the White House and the Trumans and the world than to Israel Jerusalem, who calls himself a doctor. “I have little use for the laws required for scientific certainty. Laws are to keep the idiots in check, to keep dumb doctors from accidentally murdering dumb patients. Fervently I believe that I am exempt from these laws and that every discovery I have ever made, including my love of another woman, has been made because I broke the rules.”

“You love another woman?”

“I have done that, yes. That is where I caught my mismytosis. Everything good and fine has to be paid for at some time. That’s a law of life that never seems to change. You should know that by now, since you have called yourself a scientist.” Again she leaves him, this time more successfully. She has hurled the word scientist at him. As a dare? As a threat? As a noble calling he has shamed?

“No, no!” Now it is his turn to run after her. The words pour out of his mouth, out of his brain, out of the knowledge and instinct that he is overwhelmed with tremors and tears to discover is still, preciously, his: “Sometimes diseases, viruses, bacteria, plena, run their course. Like an illness running through a flock of sheep or group of kids, it comes, infects, makes ill, abates and disappears. Sometimes it comes back next year, next season, next heat wave or cold spell. Sometimes it comes back in a slightly mutated state, last year’s flu only slightly reformed, renamed and out to find new converts to its way of death. Sometimes it seems to disappear forever. Sometimes that ‘forever’ is centuries or decades or only years. Sometimes medicines appear to eradicate something, we think forever, only to suffocate it until it learns how to survive its holocaust and reappear. Glause and mismytosis—aliyahhah: That is what it was called! Aliyahhah!—I will bet money are the same! I believe…I believe…!” He finds these next words almost impossible to utter. “I believe that I myself am a carrier of glause. You have inspired me to attempt to find out. I shall contact you when I have found out.” And this time it’s he who runs away and off across the park.

“Be careful,” she cries out after him. She sits down on a bench. She is too tired and she recognizes what is beginning.

She is becoming God's prisoner again. Voices inside her head torment her. A fit is overcoming her. She knows the voice. It is not a strange voice. It is velvet and reassuring and comforting. She is not crazy and not hearing an imaginary voice. "To give into passion is wrong," the Bishop says, "and contrary to what makes us human beings. People do not need to have sex. People can be pure. People can be chaste." He says these words loudly, imprecatingly, with a voice booming higher and higher, commanding her, as he pumps her harder and harder, having mounted her with his purple robes raised over his knobbly white legs, he is raping her, yelling louder and louder in an empty cathedral: "I welcome any agency that helps people to be chaste and pure and human. We must care about the lives of human beings inside the womb…" She is 12 years old and the Bishop is 68.

Grace falls on the ground of Lafayette Square. It is spring and she is having her seasonal fit. It is like her period, though annual and not monthly, and there is nothing she can do about it, and she wishes that the damn thing didn't always seem to happen away from her rooms. She is glad Israel's gone, and she hopes a stranger will be kind and get her home and not to the police, for there is nothing to be done but toss and turn for several days. She is already tossing and thrashing and spitting out drool.

Please, Israel, please discover something that will save us both.

I am waiting for the undertaker. Washington undertakers take a long time to arrive. One of these days they won't come at all.

The International Conference begins this morning at Punic Center. Finally, this year the experts who come to these things from all over the world have been requested—rather than talk endlessly about blodes and the measurements of vel and all the endless scientific jargon this wretched disease has accumulated like so much bilge water (none of which has done anything to halt its spread)—to address their remarks specifically to the desperate state of this plague and how to end it. Middlemarch will speak. Dye will speak. Bubu will announce something. (Bubu is always announcing something.) These are still the Big Three. They speak at every conference. They spend more time flying around to conferences than they do in their laboratories or in any vicinity where they might encounter a Francis dead on their floor. Why does anyone think there will be better ideas this year than last? Oh, there's rumor of some important breakthrough. (There's always rumor of some important breakthrough.) There's rumor new figures are the worst yet. (The figures are always the worst yet.) There's rumor there will never be a cure.

I wanted to get to Punic early, to try to have a few words with the important people before they're gobbled up. Big scientists are now like movie stars, the media mobs them so. I've a few notions of my own I'd like to put to Bubu or to Jerry Middlemarch. I grew up with Bubu. I had sex once with Jerry. Come to think of it, I had sex with Bubu, too. More or less. Neither one would own these memories. But they're good enough to make them stand in front of me for a few minutes and

pretend to listen. I had a good night's sleep. There was no horror show of dreams. There were no night sweats. There was no waking up shaking. And crying out.

In my shower I discovered a small blood-red slash in between my little and next-to-last toes on my left foot. So here it is. At last. I've been waiting for you for a long time. Hello, Nector.

So now I'm contagious.

Bubu proved Nector is contagious. Or, as the favored term is, "transmissible." Transmissible is evidently less contagious than contagious.

Now I'm transmissible.

I can transmit it.

Whatever "it" is.

There are now many thoughts on what "it" is.

But no consensus.

God forbid there should be agreement on anything. There hasn't been on anything having to do with this wretched shit from Day One. Which was only a lifetime a few months ago. And now I am contagious.

The Nector is transmissible and nobody knows what the Nector is or what is going on here.

Except that when you get the Nector you don't live for very long.

I'm both amazed and terrified that I'm able to accept this awful stranger (my Nector, not dead Francis on my floor) into my life so calmly. (There have been many deaths on my floor.) I knew I was ambient for Underlying Condition (UC). I think we all are. There can't be a gay man in the world who, by now, isn't. Monitoring my vel count, there had been no overt manifestation of UC in my body. But ambiance is one thing and the Nector is another. One day it just shows up. And that's it. Isn't it, Francis? Ima-gine being so well prepared for death.

Hello, Stranger. Hello, Nector. Hello Little Blood-Red Spot. Hello, Death.

Ninety-eight percent of my patients are sick with UC. The few healthy ones have good reason to fear they won't be for much longer. Sixty-nine percent of the sick ones have died.

I went into medicine to help people. I think most doctors did. Too, because I loved men, my mission was even more resplendent. I don't mean in any salacious way. (There have certainly

been physical pleasures, but there are more men in medicine to feel up the ladies than anyone would believe; most doctors have difficulties in personal relationships, difficulties with words, sentences, talking out loud: It's not any wonder why the calling to medicine, to bodies, to investigations and insertions, can be so appealing to the socially maladroit). I mean that one is doubly blessed not only to be able to help people but to help those people one instinctively loves most.

I fall in love with my patients all the time. Oh, nothing ever happens and they don't even know it. These are my silly romantic fantasies, and they hurt no one except perhaps myself, for, in having them, I've had precious little of anything permanent. I assume this must be the way I've wanted it, that I'm a very shy man, and this shyness, more than anything, makes me live alone, even though unwillingly. It's hard to overcome shyness; I've rarely seen anyone as shy as I am do it successfully. We keep so much inside ourselves. And the fantasies get worse, not better. When nothing comes along to take their place, the possibility of love becomes a gargantuan truth, and further from possibility, from actuality. No! It still can happen!

I fell in love with Francis, who is dead on my floor. Not that I would have, even if I'd had the chance, said to him, "I love you." I fell in love with him as he was dying. I diagnosed him with UC when he first came to me. I can sense now when someone with UC is going to get sick. That's what I want to talk to Jerry about. It's got to do with the look of skin. There's some sort of light-purple glow, almost invisible, that I can sense deep inside, almost as if it's radiating itself out. Francis came down with nimroid. Then ridilinitis. Then the Sals. Finally, of course, the Nector. At one point he had them all simultaneously. (Not that we knew any of this then.) This is not an easy burden for the body or mind or soul to bear.

His skin, now, is burnished bronze. It is one of the ironies of UC that, if you die quickly, often you can go to your death looking better than you looked in life. His skin was naturally dark anyway, so he looks even more stunning. He had lovely Northern Italian genes that passed on blond hair and dark skin, and the feel of it, smooth, slightly brushed with fine golden wisps of hair on his chest and his very strong legs that are—were—long and pliant, like a swimmer's or a dancer's. Oh, stop it! He kissed me this morning.

The bell rang early. I was up, I'd discovered my Nector, I'd had my coffee, I'd glanced at the hateful Monument, which still reports this plague most parsimoniously, if at all. I dressed for the conference.

"I didn't sleep so well. I'm feeling awful. I'm burning up. I'm sicker than ever. I just know it. I'm so sorry for coming over so early and without calling. I didn't know what else to do or where to go. I don't want to go to the hospital! Please don't send me to the hospital!"

Going to the hospital these days means indefinite "sequestering," which is another word for being quarantined. As if locking up all the cases would make any difference. Even if anyone could ever identify all the cases. (How do you lock up the entire population of Africa?)

I examined him immediately.

He was standing in front of me, naked. I find swollen glands everywhere. Under his arms. In his groin. In his neck. My hands are darting softly, exploring for more signs that can only tell me the worst. I am crying inside. Death is raging inside this beautiful young man. And my penis is hard.

My penis was hard so I was standing bending forward, awkwardly, trying not to look foolish.

“I’m really sick, aren’t I? I’m such a chatterbox. I can find words for all occasions. I’ve fucked with kids all my life, guys my own age. You’re old enough to be my father. Right now I’d give anything to live the rest of my life with someone like you. But it’s too late, isn’t it?”

And that’s when he leaned forward to meet my leaning forward, and he kissed me. I held him tightly in my arms. I ached to protect him from all harm. And my erection went down as I could feel his rising up.

“Well, look at that,” he said, smiling down, completely unselfconscious, as only the beautiful can be about their bodies, which haven’t been their enemies, as they are for the rest of us.

I wanted to say, “I have been wanting to kiss you and hold you from the very first moment you walked into this office years ago, fresh out of Michigan, where, yes, you had been on the swim team. I was on a swim team once, at Yigdal, before you were born, and not for very long. They discovered I wasn’t as good as my twin brother, who was a champion.”

“Can you save me a little longer?”

Before I could decide whether to be honest or supportive, he clapped his hand over my mouth. “I don’t want to hear your answer. Just do your best.”

I held his hand to my mouth. I kissed it and then I just held it to my face. I think my tears came before his. But his came, too. And we stood there, awkwardly, looking in each other’s eyes, and crying.

“Come, put on your clothes,” was all I could say, trying to help him dress.

“No, come down here. Beside me.” He sat down on the cold floor of my office—some worn and ancient linoleum whose dark browns I once thought looked bookish and, along with a desire to be so viewed myself, is in need of changing. He pulled me down beside him. I could see his hand I was still holding turning the blazingly red shade that signifies consumption by the Nimroid, as it flushes the blood’s final journey from heart to brain; and on his face blotches and spots were now merging into one great splotch. I touched this face. “Oh, my Francis,” I wanted to say, “…” What? “Oh, my Francis, I love you?” Or “Oh, my Francis, I am so sorry?” Or “Oh, my Francis, we have been so foolish in this world to believe we are wanted and loved, and it is in another world that we shall hold each other, never to be so naive, never to let go, never to waste so much time.” I lay

down beside him and we held each other. I felt so clumsy. I felt so old, so very old. And, most of all, so useless. He was burning hot. He was trying to pull my clothes off me, my thick tweed armor. He was kissing me, but they were to the air: He was so thrashing from the fever erupting in him that he had no control over the sudden jolts tossing him this way and that. He was like a criminal being electrocuted.

“I can’t stand up!” These were his last words on this earth. He was in fact trying to do so, trying to stand up. In the seconds since I’d last seen his face, his skin had gone from red to purple, like some horror movie with special effects happening before your eyes.

Then it happens, of course. Impious me begged a god I never knew to save this boy, to give him just a little more time—to get him cooled down, to get him to a bed, to get him a shot of Faranx (which doesn’t really help, though we give it anyway—we have nothing else to give!), with just an extra second to say, “I love you, I think of you all the time, I worry about you, what are you doing for dinner, I apologize for this awful linoleum, I’ve wished as long as I can remember for someone to share this house…” Oh, all these silly thoughts of a lonely old man who could and should have had love but—for whatever reasons, mine, the world’s—has not… I was holding his hands so tightly, and he was looking up at me with eyes so filled with questions: Why? Why me? Why now? Perhaps: Isn’t there even time for just another hug? But these were only the useless babblings of an ineffectual doctor and an ineffective man, a futile attempt to reach out before it’s too late, a fruitless, worthless sense of my own utter powerlessness. He lay dead in my arms. Francis is dead on my floor. So now I sit and wait for the men from the morgue. They will be wearing clothing so thick they are safe from the radioactive.

Diagnosed with Nimroid and dead from UC and incinerated into ashes in a little over an hour. The law says all UC deaths must be incinerated swiftly. Whole burials are forbidden. His parents, whom I shortly call, when they hear the diagnosis, refuse the chance to see or claim him. Send them the bill. There are no siblings—or the parents say there are no siblings—to come forward. Is there a former lover? “A what?” they ask. They hang up the phone before I can answer. Diagnosed and dead and incinerated and disowned in a little over an hour. My God.

I hear the mail come through the slot. Force of habit makes me fetch it. There is a letter from Francis: “I love you. I want you to hold me and kiss me and make love to me. All this time we wasted I haven’t had the courage to tell you my feelings. All this time neither have you. I can tell the way you touch me and look at me, wanting to kiss me and hold me and let me kiss and hold you back. But afraid. Like we’re all afraid. Why are people always afraid?”

Francis is dead on my floor and there are stains in my underpants from semen unshared and I now have my own Nector that will soon lead me into the same fevers that boiled Francis alive. How much time do I have? How much truth can I expose? How many murderers can I murder?

I have been silent for too long.

If a man is involved in a historical evil, am I then an evil man?

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